

*"Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." Acts 19:4.
"And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him." Luke 7:29-30.*

Nowadays it is fashionable in some circles to say that the baptism of John the Baptist is not for today - supposedly it belongs to a previous dispensation. If it is true that John's baptism is not for today, then the Christian ritual of water baptism becomes, at best, optional. Some would say that water baptism has been completely done away with and replaced with a so-called "Spirit Baptism."

DOES "SPIRIT BAPTISM" REPLACE JOHN'S BAPTISM? It should be noted that those who were converted at Pentecost, having experienced the Baptism with the Holy Ghost there (Acts 1:5, 2:2-4) did not feel that they were excused from being water baptized. On the contrary, 3000 converts sought and received water baptism that same day (Acts 2:41).

In Acts 10:47 we see, concerning the Gentiles who received the Holy Ghost when Peter preached to the household of Cornelius, that Peter still believed that they needed water baptism. The New Testament presents the Baptism with the Holy Ghost as a corporate event by which God authenticated the institution of His Church. It is not an individual event, as some have thought. The apostles were to be baptized in the Holy Ghost together, Acts 1:8. Obviously the Baptism with the Holy Ghost does not refer to what happens when a person is saved, since the Apostles were already saved before they were baptized with the Holy Ghost.

Regardless of one's conception of the meaning of the Baptism with the Holy Ghost, it is evident that it was not meant to replace or supersede John's baptism in water. On the contrary, those who experienced the Baptism with the Holy Ghost were all the more eager to submit to John's baptism, as part of their obedience to the Lord which is an evidence of the fullness of the Spirit.

WAS JOHN'S BAPTISM AN OLD TESTAMENT RITE? Some say that John's baptism is not for today because it was an ordinance for Old Testament times, valid only for that dispensation but not for today. If this is so, then why does the Old Testament say nothing about the rite of baptism as practiced by John? How can it be an Old Testament ritual if the Old Testament does not even mention it?

If it was an Old Testament rite, why did John's baptism create such a sensation in Jewish society, with *"Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan"* rushing out into the wilderness to be baptized by John, Matthew 3:5-6?

If John's baptism was nothing new, just a familiar Old Testament rite, why did the Jews think John's baptism was a sign of the coming of the Messiah, Luke 3:15, John 1:25, 31?

Why did even many Pharisees and Sadducees seek John's baptism, Matthew 3:7? If it was a traditional Old Testament ordinance, they would have already obtained it from a clergyman with much better standing in their ministerial association than the rugged interloper John.

If John's Baptism was an established Old Testament ordinance, why were the chief priests and elders unable to answer Christ's question as to where the authority for John's baptism came from, Matthew 21:24-27? If it had been based on any Old Testament or rabbinical authority, the Jewish leaders would have been able to readily cite the source of the authority for John's baptism.

If John's Baptism was a familiar Jewish rite, why did 3000 "devout" Jews (Acts 2:5) receive baptism on the day of Pentecost? Would not these "devout" men have already been baptized as Jews? Some have tried to identify John's baptism with an Old Testament rite of initiation into the priesthood, but there is no resemblance between that Old Testament rite (Leviticus 8) and John's baptism, which was for people of all classes, including soldiers and publicans (Mark 1:5, Luke 3:12-14).

It is clear from all that the New Testament teaches, that John's baptism was something new - no one had previously received it or heard of it. Therefore, it was not an Old Testament Jewish rite.

WAS JOHN'S MINISTRY PART OF THE OLD TESTAMENT DISPENSATION? Some would say that John's ministry was pre-Christian, part of the old Jewish dispensation of law, and therefore his baptism is not for today.

However, in Matthew 11:12-13 we read, *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.*"

Christ taught the same thing in Luke 16:16: *"The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it."*

Meanwhile, we see in Mark 1:1 that John's ministry is described as *"the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* Clearly John's ministry, including his baptism, was part of the Christian dispensation.

It is plain that the modern Christian dispensation began with the ministry of John, not at Pentecost or an even later date as taught by some. The old dispensation of the law and the prophets ended with John, and we see that while John was still alive, the Kingdom of God had already been set up and that all kinds of people were entering into it. (So much for the mistaken teaching that Christ failed to set up the Kingdom at His first advent, and that we will have to wait for His Second Coming so He can give it another try).

If John's ministry was part of the modern Christian dispensation and of the Kingdom of God, then of course John's baptism is for today.

Those who believe that a new Christian dispensation started at Pentecost (contrary to all Biblical teaching and evidence) should explain why John's Baptism continued to be practiced at Pentecost, not to mention at Philippi, Corinth and all through the Book of Acts. Why did Peter preach the same gospel to the Italian Gentiles which was preached by John, in association with John's baptism (Acts 10:37), if John's gospel and baptism are not for this dispensation?

DID JOHN PRACTICE CAMPBELLITE BAPTISM? Some have alleged that John's baptism is not for today because he was baptizing people to get them saved by that act of baptism, as is taught by the Church of Christ (Campbellites) today. Allegedly at some point in the book of Acts, we somehow slipped into a new dispensation, in which we are now saved by faith rather than by baptism.

But there is one thing we must understand, and that is that salvation has always been by faith, not by works. Abraham, before the law, and David, under the law, were saved by faith (Romans 4:2-8). There has never been a time, in any dispensation, when anyone was saved by good works (including baptism). If John was baptizing people to get them saved, then why did Christ submit to his baptism? Did Christ need to be saved? (Answer: Christ was sinless and did not need to be saved - He was baptized because John's baptism was, and still is, a requirement for membership in any true Baptist church, like the Baptist church in Jerusalem that Christ founded).

If John believed that he was getting people saved by baptizing them, then he was just as deluded as any modern Campbellite, Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox clergyman who believes that he can regenerate someone by baptizing them.

However, it is clear from Matthew 3:7-10 that John was not baptizing people to get them saved. He refused to baptize those who had not brought forth fruits meet for repentance. Had John been under the Campbellite delusion, he would have said, "You rascals are not saved, but we can fix that right now. Just give mental assent to the gospel, let me dunk you, and you will be saved."

John never baptized anyone to get them saved. He first preached repentance to them, Matthew 3:2, just as Paul did in his ministry, Acts 26:20, and just as any preacher of the Gospel should do today. Once his hearers had repented in recognition of their sins (Matthew 3:6), he baptized them.

IF JOHN'S BAPTISM IS NOT FOR TODAY, THEN WHAT IS? In Ephesians 4:5, Paul says there is "one baptism." Those who say that John's baptism is not for today would say that the "one baptism" for this age is "Spirit baptism." However, we have already seen that those who experienced the Baptism with the Holy Ghost at Pentecost still felt the need for water baptism, and willingly submitted to it.

Once we admit that John's baptism is not for today, we have given the store away to those who say that the "One Baptism" is the mystical "Spirit baptism," and who do not require water baptism for church membership. In fact, we now enter the slippery slope that leads us downward to the position taught by hyper-dispensationalists such as J.C. O'Hair and Cornelius R. Stam, and their followers in the Berean Bible Society and Things to Come Mission, who teach that water baptism is not to be administered today at all.

The favorite proof-text of this crowd is 1 Corinthians 1:17, "*Christ sent me not to baptize.*" They understand this to mean that Paul was saying that water baptism is not for today, but they cleverly ignore 1 Corinthians 1:15-16 where Paul says he personally administered the baptism of Crispus, Gaius and the household of Stephanas. (At no point did Paul or any other apostle say, "John's baptism is no longer for today - all you need now is Spirit baptism." John's baptism was a requirement to be an apostle, Acts 1:22). It is obvious that Paul was referring to baptizing in his own name as mentioned in the previous verses. It is also obvious that Paul would not diminish the Great Commission that was given by Jesus himself. To go, preach and baptize. It would be ludicrous to assume that water baptism is not necessary by this statement of Paul, "*Christ sent me not to baptize.*"

A less extreme view than that of the hyper dispensationalists, who reject all water baptism, is that of the various evangelical denominations who regard water baptism as optional. Their policy is, "We will baptize you, even by immersion, if that is what you would like, but such is not a requirement for membership in our local churches."

Example of groups that take this position are the Free Presbyterian Church (founded by Ian Paisley in Northern Ireland) and the Evangelical Free Church of America.

Former EFCA President Arnold T. Olson, in his book "This We Believe," defended the Evangelical Free distinctive of not requiring baptism for membership, saying "Are the doors of the Evangelical Free Church to be open only to those coming from Baptist churches? . . . Are we to be a church of former Baptists only? Then why not just another Baptist church?" (Hmmm, that might not be such a bad idea, Dr. Olson!) There are 3 main positions in evangelicalism today: 1. John's baptism is not for today - you don't need any water baptism, just "Spirit baptism," whatever that is. So we refuse to administer a rite that is not for today. 2. John's baptism is not for today, you don't really need it, but if you feel the desire for it, we will administer it for you anyway, against our better judgment, so you won't feel the need to go join a Baptist church. 3. John's baptism is for today, it is a Christian rite, it is a requirement for membership in the Body or local church (Acts 2:41, 1 Corinthians 12:13) and it can only be validly administered by a local church that requires John's baptism as a condition for membership.

This writer takes the third position - John's baptism is for today, it is the initiation into a life of obedient Christian discipleship (Mark 16:16) and a requirement for membership in any Scriptural church.

Christ thought that John's baptism was so important that He included it in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) which was to be in effect until the end of the world. That settles it for me. John's baptism is for today.

What the Theologians Say About John's Baptism

The purpose of these citations by various Baptist and non-Baptist theologians is to **demonstrate** that John's Baptism was distinct from any ritual or tradition in the previous Old Testament dispensation, and that it is to be identified with (and practiced in) the current Christian dispensation or Church Age. **Please note: By using these citations, it does not necessarily establish an endorsement of the writers.**

John Gill - "*Then said Paul, etc.*, In reply to their answer, understanding them that they were baptized by John, he takes it up, and gives an account of John's baptism: showing how agreeable it was, and that it was the same baptism with the baptism of Christ, being administered in His name: '*John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance;*' which required repentance antecedent to it, and was a fruit and effect, and so an evidence of it: '*saying unto the people;*' the people of the Jews, the common people, the multitude that attended on his ministry: '*that they should believe on him, which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus;*' so that he preached faith in Christ, as well as repentance towards God; and made the one as well as the other a necessary prerequisite unto baptism; which shows, that his baptism and Christian baptism are the same." - Commentary on Acts 19:4.

A.T. Robertson - "Paul [in Acts 19:4-5] does not mean to say that John's baptism was inadequate, but he simply explains what John really taught and so what his baptism signified. . . . Apollos was not rebaptized. The 12 apostles were not rebaptized. Jesus received no other baptism than that of John. . . . It was not from the close of John's ministry that Peter dates the new dispensation, but from the beginning."

Thomas Armitage - "Under credentials from God, the baptism practiced by John and Jesus was identical at any rate. But neither the Father, the Son, nor the Spirit, added one injunction on baptism after Pentecost. . . . Can absurdity be more absurd than that which supposes John to have stood in a nondescript dispensation of his own when he baptized Jesus; while Jesus, when He received His baptism, stood in still another dispensation. John's ministry had nothing in common with the economy of Moses, for Jesus Himself says that the '*Law was until John,*' from which time the 'good news of the kingdom is preached, and every man presses into it;' the same kingdom that both John and Jesus preached. And what other kingdom is preached today? Christ was never baptized in water but once; and will men say that His baptism was not in the Christian dispensation, simply because He was baptized before He ascended to heaven? . . . if John's preaching and baptism were neither Mosaic nor Christian, neither could those of Jesus be; as authorized by God to introduce the Gospel, they stand or fall together." - From "A History of the Baptists," pp. 50-51.

John Piper - "Today we begin our series with the baptizing ministry of John the Baptist. This is the New Testament origin of Christian baptism. There is a close continuity between Christian Baptism and John's baptism. John began baptizing, Jesus continued baptizing, and He commanded the church to keep on with the practice. . . . [John] infuriated the Pharisees by calling the people to renounce reliance on the sign of the covenant that they got when they were infants, and to receive another sign to show that they were not relying on Jewish birth, but on the mercy of God received by repentance and faith. A new people within Israel was being formed, and a new sign of a new covenant was being instituted."

Ray Stedman - "You see, the baptism of John was something different new and startling that had never occurred before. The priests, of course, had had many washings, connected with their duties under the Levitical system, but this was always done in the temple according to a prescribed ritual. But John was different. John was not a priest, yet he baptized. And he did it in the rivers and streams, wherever he could find enough water. Because it was something quite new, John's baptism would immediately arouse the question, 'By what authority do you give us a new ritual in Israel?'"

W.A. Criswell - "The Christian movement began with John. . . . The Gospel of Jesus Christ began with the ministry of the Baptist."

R.C.H. Lenski - "The supposition that John belonged to the old covenant is contradicted by Jesus Himself who described him as an object of Old Testament prophecy which ended with Malachi; Jesus thus combines John with Himself as opening the promised new covenant."

John A. Broadus - "If John's teaching and baptizing are to be set off as essentially different in kind from Christian teaching and Christian baptism, these beginning only on the day of Pentecost, then we have the strange contradiction that Christ Himself, as a teacher and baptizer (John 3:22, 4:1) did not belong to the Christian dispensation. Moreover, in Matthew 11:12 and also in Luke 16:16, our Lord speaks of the kingdom of heaven as already in actual existence, and counts John among the preachers of the kingdom of heaven, as distinct from those who merely predicted it."

S.E. Anderson - "Of course [John] knew about the Jewish ceremonial washings and dippings, He would know about the Essene immersions in running water. But all these had no content, no meaning, no significance for the coming Messiah and His saving message. . . . No mention is made of 'proselyte baptism' in the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, Philo, Josephus, the ancient Targums, the Mishna, the New Testament or in ancient Christian writers."

J.R. Graves - "If John's Baptism belonged to the Law of Moses, or Jewish Dispensation, it certainly could be found written in the book of the law, as circumcision and all other legal ordinances. But it cannot be found written in the book of the law, as can circumcision and all other legal observances. Therefore, John's Baptism did not belong to the law of Jewish Dispensation."

H. Boyce Taylor - "John the Baptist baptized Christ and all the 12 apostles and Christ's church is built on them. . . . Since the material for the church Jesus built was made ready by a Baptist preacher it was Baptist material and the church organized out of it was a Baptist church."